

# The Contemporary literature of German-Speaking Switzerland [Fortsetzung folgt]

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **The Swiss observer : the journal of the Federation of Swiss Societies in the UK**

Band (Jahr): - **(1923)**

Heft 113

PDF erstellt am: **06.08.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-690965>

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**THE CONTEMPORARY LITERATURE OF GERMAN-SPEAKING SWITZERLAND.**

(A Lecture delivered by Dr. Paul Lang at University College on June 8th, 1923.)

If we are properly to understand the present status of that part of the contemporary literature of Switzerland which is written in German, though felt in German-Swiss dialect, it behoves us to view the evolution of this literature since, say, 1900. In 1900 our people looked back mainly on three writers who had dominated the century which had just passed away. *Jeremias Gotthelf*, whom your Carlyle loved dearly, had immortalised the sturdy and powerful race of the Bernese Midlands in numerous novels. This great epic genius, who at one time was described as the Father of German Naturalism, had then been dead since 1854. But, his name had become greater and greater in the course of the century. In its last decade he had become something like a legendary figure, standing like a kind of Homer at the beginning of the literature of modern German-speaking Switzerland. Of the new centralised Switzerland, which built itself slowly up after the Napoleonic Wars and is in many ways so different from the loose federation of independent cantons of older times, he is the first great writer.

The most profound study of Gotthelf was written by *Gottfried Keller*, the Zurich novelist. Keller's life covers the greater part of the century. He was born in 1819 and died in 1890. If the growth of Radicalism, which made its way throughout Europe in the first half of the century, was viewed with dismay by Gotthelf, who was a country vicar, Keller, on the contrary, born some twenty years later and the son of a town-craftsman, fiercely embraced Radicalism in politics and a mixture of pantheism and atheism in religion. Having abandoned, under the influence of Feuerbach, belief in the immortality of the soul, he felt himself to be more deeply under an obligation to make the very best of this life. The Swiss, on the whole, can afford to become atheists, because their inherited sense of duty is so overwhelming that no metaphysical speculation can shake it. Keller became the typical representative of the morals and politics of the middle-classes of the rising towns of German-speaking Switzerland which determine largely the present character of the country. He, as a young man, took an active part in the movement for a strong, federal constitution, and later he also stood in cantonal matters for the extension of democracy. During his lifetime, Switzerland became the highly industrialised country we now know and built up a dense network of railways. Keller was a citizen poet. Yet, though in his "Novellen," which prompted Heyse to describe him as the Shakespeare of this particular form of fiction—a form midway between your novel and short story—the public life of his city, Zurich, and more generally, his country is reflected, he was nevertheless a true, original poet. As such he could not identify himself so entirely with his community of artisans and merchants as could the country vicar, Gotthelf, with his Emmentaler peasants. In his "Seldwyler Geschichten" Keller looked at the doings of his compatriots with a mild and ironical eye, whilst Gotthelf wrote his books to educate his parishioners. In Keller's last poems a mature philosophy is expressed which rivals the Lebensphilosophie of Goethe.

Schiller, one knows, developed in an important essay the conception of two eternal types of poetry: the *naïve* and the *sentimentalische* Dichtung. He felt that he was a representative of the latter and that Goethe was a *naïver Dichter*. This helps us to throw a light upon the divergencies of the two great Zurich poets of this century. Whereas Keller belonged to the Goethe type, *C. F. Meyer* must undoubtedly be placed in Schiller's category. He has the eminently historical interest of this type, coupled to an extraordinary degree with the inclination for masks under which to hide his feelings. None of his *Novellen* deal with the life of his time. A number of the great figures of the past, Lucretia Borgia, Thomas à Becket, Catharina de Medici, Dante, Gustav Adolf, appear in them. The great heroic periods of the Renaissance, the times of the wars of the Huguenots and of Louis XIV. are depicted therein. In condensation, at times even in artificiality, his books are unique achievements. His lyrics are the best Swiss lyrics of the century, his ballads belong to the best German ballads ever written. Of conservative, aristocratic stock, Meyer found himself very late. He, like Keller, was no fervent Christian, but whilst his colleague's sense of duty was directed towards the common weal, his only aim was Art and its grandeur. Meyer was influenced by France and her literature as much as by Germany. He hesitated even for a moment as to whether he should start writing in German or in French. Yet literature was not his only bent. For painting and sculpture he had a shrewd eye. Some even say that he often describes scenes as a sculptor or a fresco painter would see them. Meyer was born six years after Keller and died two years before the new century opened.

I shall not waste many words on the fourth great man: *Carl Spitteler*. Last week I showed

how he stands as a transition between the two centuries. His culminating work, the "Olympische Frühling," only appeared at the beginning of this century. Spitteler, in contrast with the three other writers, is in open revolt against his environment. Even more than Meyer does he keep apart from politics and the highways and byways of his compatriots. His society is international. His attitude is cosmopolitan. Educated in Basle, the town of the three frontiers, he owes far more to classical and French literature than to German literature. He, too, is a *sentimentalischer* poet. History does not even suffice him to master his passions, so he goes back to mythology. In his great epic he has achieved a depth of artistic concentration which far surpasses even Meyer's attainment. As to his metaphysical outlook it is as black as it could be imagined. If Keller found as much uplift as gloom in the Feuerbach materialism, Spitteler was deeply influenced by Schopenhauer, Jakob Burckhardt and Darwin and sees no sense in life whatever. His would be the blackest despair if he were not sustained by his love for the beautiful and his sturdy determination to attain glory by greatness. The sense of duty is in him coupled with an intense and methodical will-power. Bent exclusively on his artistic work, he owed essentially to this quality his final success.

If by his outlook, which is no longer provincial, but European, Spitteler belongs to this century of Swiss literature, yet his metaphysics are typical of the nineteenth century. We shall see that new and different forces appear after him in Swiss literature. As regards Spitteler's technique—it is a dense, brilliant, but a rhythmical, not a musical technique—it marks a climax and an end. The breaking up of masks and the dissolution of what had crystallized into statues and monuments, is the keynote of the following years. Nature becomes a predominant force again with the poets of the twentieth century, who are mostly bored with history and challenge more openly than did Keller the atmosphere of their business-loving compatriots.

In 1900, then, a man observing the living literary tradition of the country would find Gotthelf had been dead for nearly half a century, Keller for ten years, Meyer, whose harvest only came in during his latest years, for two years, but that Spitteler had not yet published his greatest work, though the "Prometheus und Epimetheus" and the set of his *Between Works* had already brought him some fame as an original literary man.

\* \* \*

From the foregoing it may be obvious that at different times of the century alterations in the fabric and composition of Society have determined the different attitude of Swiss writers towards their fellow-citizens. We must not overlook the fact that, in the course of these hundred years, the population of Switzerland increased from 2 millions to 3.75. Far more significant even is the growth of the towns. The population of Basle increased in that century from 15,000 to 130,000 inhabitants, Bern from 15,000 to 100,000, and Zurich from 10,000 to 190,000. The extending industrialism fertilized all kinds of intellectual and artistic enterprises. The press developed, municipal theatres and universities were built, libraries were erected and orchestras founded. The greater part of this activity only sprang up after the middle of the century, which explains how it comes that the generations born, say, after 1860 were markedly freer and less narrow in their outlook than the preceding ones. Those were the men to appreciate the art of Meyer and Spitteler. The second half of the century was, moreover, characterised by the rapid extension of tourism. Hotels sprang up like mushrooms, and Alpine railways were built everywhere. The growing contact with educated foreigners of all nations gave a great stimulus to the teaching of foreign languages, and, if the old simplicity of the mountaineers suffered somewhat from the daily influence of hotel staffs of foreign extraction and often somewhat laxer morals, there is no doubt that, on the other hand, the hotel industry brought with it right up into the highest valleys a certain understanding of, and taste for, the finer things of life. But the foreign, polishing influences made themselves felt even more in industry and commerce, in the universities and in the theatre than in the mountains. If the outlook became less provincial, it often became in German-speaking Switzerland too strongly directed solely towards Germany. Many large German firms founded branches in Switzerland, certain universities flung their doors, perhaps too widely, to German Professors of Literature, History, Theology and Law, to mention only those departments in which national prejudices may have an influence on teaching. A great many daily papers provided their subscribers with illustrated Sunday supplements which were manufactured in Berlin. All this directed the eyes of the young writers towards Berlin as the Mecca to which Keller had gone and from which he had, moreover, returned a successful writer. We shall see that not all the young Swiss writers who went there were to free themselves again from the influence of this city as he did.

If Berlin thus became, with the ever-increasing spell of the Wilhelminische Reich, the load-stone towards which the minds of the more enterprising

youth of German-speaking Swiss extraction were directed, a reaction amongst the more conservative elements made itself felt at the same time. Since the second half of the last century there has been a big movement in German literature called *Heimatlidung*. It once more became popular to depict one's native soil and its beauties, and this fashion had not yet lost favour with the great masses of the readers in the beginning of this century. The popularity of Keller's novels had benefited from this disposition of the reading public. The same held good of his followers. All those who continued to depict their native soil with a loving pen, especially if they did not forget to bring in Alpine scenery, were practically sure to sell their books in Germany, where a new class of travelling middle-class people had arisen who were eager to prepare themselves for their coming holiday trip to the beauties of Alpine Switzerland by means of reading Swiss fiction. The reaction against Berlin, however, went even deeper. It was no sacrifice for the Swiss writer to localise his stories to the town of his birth. It was one to write in his native dialect, for by acting thus he deliberately barred all readers from the German Reich from his books. In spite of this, Dialect Literature had spread more and more, particularly since 1900. Whereas this kind of poetry had been practised in the past by uneducated people merely, now university professors and doctors of philosophy wrote poems and plays in their native dialect. A deep, moving tragedy was even written in dialect and was several times produced on the stage, which hitherto had been thought to be only fit for the most innocent dialect farces. Those who were afraid of the lure of Berlin and who believed that many aspects of Swiss life could never be genuinely expressed in books or on a stage entirely controlled by Germans, centred round the dialect poets, von Tavel, von Greyerz, Reinhart, Loosli, Lienert and Dominik Müller. Economic reasons, of course, kept this movement within certain limits. No Swiss writer is able to-day to gain his livelihood with dialect poetry or prose alone.

And yet, it is a characteristic of Swiss literature, as it has developed in this century, that the professional writer becomes the rule, not the exception. Gotthelf had been a rector all his days besides being a great epic writer, Keller had devoted half of his life to the service of the State, Spitteler, however, was nearly all his life either quite independent or at least in a position to devote a great part of his time to literary work. With the extension of the Swiss press more openings were gradually to be found for literary talents, the novel writers, especially, always found a large and ready market in Germany. No wonder that this form of literature was still the predominant one in the first decade of the century.

Yet the novels of the new men of whom we have now to speak and with whom we approach present-day literature show in many respects a different outlook on life than did the *Novellen* of Meyer and Keller. The historic novel, dear to C. F. Meyer, is dead. One man only, a minor though agreeable talent, *Stickelberger*, still maintains the Meyer tradition now that *Adolf Frey*, who continued his work with two historical novels, is dead. On the other hand, G. Keller has had far more followers.

*Heinrich Fedor*, a Catholic ex-priest, shares his delight in anecdote and baroque ornament. His outlook is not a narrow confessional one: it is determined by fine qualities of the heart. Of late this writer has made certain small ventures in the historic tale, which form the first important contribution Catholicism has made to Swiss literature. The majority of his books deal, however, with simple folk, in preference with country folk. His motives are not exceedingly original, but his pictorial style, which has an extremely smooth flow, shows him to be a born *raconteur*. He is the most successful disciple of the Keller tradition with its long, solid and full-blooded sentences.

*Jakob Schaffner*, whose early work has been likened to Keller's, has probably the strongest novel-writing talent of present-day Switzerland. He, unfortunately, soon succumbed to the lure of Berlin and is to-day the President of its Writers' Association. The son of a Protestant Swiss father and a Catholic South-German mother, he is a very interesting border-case. The paternal and maternal element which in every creative man—Goethe's formula: "Zwei Seelen hab' ich, ach, in meiner Brust"—are in violent and unceasing strife, shake him hither and thither to an extraordinary degree, more so probably because for him they also mean rivalry between Protestantism and Catholicism. Thus it comes that he feels in turn attracted by Germany or Switzerland, which causes his bewildering political writings. Thus he has wonderfully expressed the psychology of the wandering craftsman who goes from change to change. Thus he depicts in turn the restless life of the great city and the peaceful one of the small town. Thus he is again and again attracted and repelled by the might of science and technics and the idyllicism of a shoemaker's shop. Schaffner's style was right from the beginning marked by a highly original vocabulary which he owes partly to his long and intimate contact with wandering artisans and lower-

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class people generally. But notwithstanding the crude character of many of his observations, his expressions are always delicate and evidence of a refined personality. Like Keller, Schaffner lives eminently on optic impressions, like him he is shy of women, though not so shy as Keller was, like him he does not believe in God, but rather in the might and power of Man's brain. Whereas Keller was swept away by the political enthusiasm of 1848, Schaffner was swept off his feet by the industrial and technical enthusiasm of the Germany of the 20th century, by Berlin growing and expanding with American speed. Whereas Keller, owing to the political evolution of Switzerland, became more and more attached to his country, Schaffner, impressed by the atmosphere of the metropolis, found his mother's country more genial to his temperament. Yet he cannot forget his fatherland either. Over and over again his dynamic novels, written in a brilliant style, depicting in turn Swiss and German milieus, knock at our doors and blow through the country, often so self-satisfied, like a fresh blast.

(To be continued.)

## ROUND AND ABOUT.

The "Bundesfeier" was celebrated last Wednesday in the London Colony with the traditional spirit and thoroughness. The concert given at the Memorial Hall by the Swiss Institute was, as usual, a great success. A characteristic of this society is the fact that its doors are open to all and every Swiss, membership not being imposed as a *sine qua non* on those who simply wish to attend the regular lectures and other gatherings, arranged by its active committee, of which Mr. H. Joss is the president. The hall was comfortably filled, and over three hundred people greeted the Swiss Minister, Mons. C. R. Paravicini, when he, in a few well-chosen sentences, opened the fête, mentioning that there was no necessity for him to enlarge on the stimulating patriotic activities of the Swiss Institute, which was so well known in our colony. The gala numbers of the programme were, without doubt, the instrumental tunes by the orchestra under the able leadership of Mr. E. P. Dick; they were quite sufficient to transplant our heart and soul into the dear old country, and this is perhaps the reason why it appears that each time we listen to this orchestra it seems to excel its previous performance. The official patriotic address was delivered by Prof. Morier-Genoud; it was an admirable appeal to our sense of duty towards our country, but I think that his references to international politics and his critical remarks on the proposed increase of the English Air Force—which, after all, is not directed against Switzerland or anyone else—might have been more suitable on another occasion. Very much to the point were certainly the few spirited words in Italian of Signora E. Lunghi, and the applause that followed them seems to lend colour to the recent statement in the *S.O.* that "the Ticinese are the spoilt children of our Colony." The gathering at the Memorial Hall started promptly to time and terminated sufficiently early to give those in quest of further inspiration an opportunity to adjourn to other Clubs. At the "Schweizerbund," 74, Charlotte Street, a gymnastic display, with historical *tableaux vivants*, was the principal feature; similar *tableaux vivants* formed also one of the chief attractions at the Union Helvetia, where the busy steward, Mr. Aug. Wyss, added to his reputation as a "Iesser Caruso." At both these clubs dancing continued into the early hours of the morning, but whilst the ladies remained cool and sweet, thanks to the light and airy garments prescribed by the dictators of modern fashion, the stronger sex was severely tried by the tropical heat, which approximated to the temperature usually ascribed to Hades! This explains, perhaps, why at one of the clubs the supply of certain refreshments ran out soon after 11 p.m.

With reference to my remarks on July 21st about a London Swiss Rifle Club, I am told that this idea was mooted some years ago and that there are considerable difficulties in establishing such a club on Swiss lines with ordnance rifles and ammunition. It seems to me, however, that it should not be impossible to adapt ourselves to English usages; after all, a particular rifle does not make a shot. I have also received a challenge from the daughter of our compatriot, Mr. F. H. Rohr, who is anxious to meet Master Barbezat in a friendly contest. Miss Rohr's most recent cards record 92 and 94 out of a possible 100.

I hear that the management of the "Foyer Suisse" has acquired on advantageous terms the lease of two houses, adjoining their present premises, in Upper Bedford Square.

## CORRESPONDENCE.

The Editor is not responsible for the opinions expressed by his Correspondents.

To the Editor of *The Swiss Observer*.

Re "S.O." EXCURSION TO SWITZERLAND.

Sir,—By the address below you can see that the party arranged by you has safely arrived in Switzerland.

It is the least we can do to express our sincere thanks for the splendid arrangements you have made for the comfortable journey of the party from London to Basle. On arrival at Basle some members of the party have asked me to convey to you their thanks and appreciation of your efforts and to let you know how much they enjoyed everything.

Very many thanks are also due to the kind manner and solicitude of Mr. Chas. Studer the Gentleman-in-Charge of the party, who did everything possible to give satisfaction to everyone and see to the comfort of every member. I must say that he succeeded in every way.

If this has been a trial trip, let me assure you that it has well succeeded, and I wish that if the work is not too much for you, every member of the Swiss Colony should avail himself at a future occasion of a trip to the glorious country from which he received his birth and infant nurture.

To the Editor of *The Swiss Observer* mine and all members of the first trip very sincere thanks!

Yours very sincerely,

Zurich, 25th July, 1923. J. J. SCHNEIDER.

## CITY SWISS CLUB.

Messieurs les membres sont avisés que la prochaine

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aura lieu le MARDI 14 AOUT, au Restaurant GATTI, et sera précédée d'un souper familial à 6.45 h. (sh. 5/6 par couvert).

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EGLISE SUISSE, 79, Endell St., W.C. 2.

Dimanche, 5 Août, 11h.—M. J. Ramseyer.  
6.30.—Dr. Huber.

## FORTHCOMING EVENTS.

Tuesday, Aug. 14th, at 6.45.—CITY SWISS CLUB: Monthly Meeting, preceded by a Supper, at Gatti's Restaurant, Strand, W.C.